



**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**  
**ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR HUMAN RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATION**  
**WASHINGTON DC 20420**

**MAY 14 1999**

Mr. John E. Plummer  
Director  
Office of Federal Agency Programs  
Occupational Safety and Health Administration  
U.S. Department of Labor  
200 Constitution Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20210

Dear Mr. Plummer:

Enclosed is the Annual Occupational Safety and Health Program Report for Fiscal Year 1998 for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as required by 29 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 1960.74. Through the cooperative efforts of our respective organizations, I hope to see further accomplishments within VA in the area of employee safety and health.

If your staff has any questions concerning the report or the VA Occupational Safety and Health program, they may contact Myrna J. Aavedal, Ph.D., Occupational Safety and Health, at (202) 273-9744.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eugene A. Brickhouse".

Eugene A. Brickhouse  
Designated Agency Safety  
and Health Official

Enclosure

**AGENCY FISCAL YEAR 1998 ANNUAL REPORT ON**  
**OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH**

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**I. SAFETY AND HEALTH PROGRAM PERFORMANCE**

**A. Injuries and Illnesses**

**1. *What are the major causes of injuries and illnesses at your Agency or Department?***

National Cemetery Administration (NCA). Two major concerns in this area are the physical exertion needed to accomplish interments in all kinds of weather conditions and terrain, and the hurried manner of completing tasks that contributes to back injuries or other injuries through slips, trips and falls.

Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). The major cause of injuries in VBA are due to the lifting of heavy files which results in back injuries.

Veterans Health Administration (VHA). The major causes of injuries and illnesses at VHA are activities that result in back injuries, musculoskeletal exertion, slips, trips, and falls. Occupations that require patient lifting, and moving, and other material handling are the primary source of injuries.

**2. *What action has the Agency taken to correct these hazards or remove employees from risk?***

NCA. When an injury occurs, victims are required to fill out an accident report, receive counseling from local supervisory staff and retraining when necessary, and are furnished additional personal protective equipment when warranted. In addition, the incident report is evaluated by area office safety staff to determine if site construction or other modification is required to remove or abate the cause of the injury. To prevent injuries, specialized training is provided through videos and interactive training. Work actions are evaluated to assess the need for protective equipment, mechanization, or increased teamwork.

VBA. VBA has provided employees instructions on heavy lifting and they have continued to work on reducing those occasions when the lifting of large quantities of files is necessary.

VHA. Developed an electronic tracking software called the "Automated Safety Incident and Surveillance Tracking System, " or ASISTS, that is compatible with VHA medical centers' computer language. ASISTS has the capability of accurately identifying, tracking, and evaluating accidents or illnesses when they occur. Each Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) and VA Medical Center accident management team will utilize this trend analysis capability to identify the root causes of these accidents and help prevent future incidents.

In August 1998, VHA sponsored a National Occupational Health and Safety Conference that was attended by VA Safety Officers and Employee Health Service staff. The conference provided staff training on topics of special interest to VA occupational safety and health practitioners including prevention of musculoskeletal injuries, ergonomics, and slips, trips and falls.

3. ***What action has been taken to address the causes of these hazards?***

NCA. OSH policies and procedures are reviewed, safety committees meet regularly, and safety inspections are routinely scheduled to assess risk issues. Tasks are re-engineered and re-thought to minimize operational risk.

VBA. Files and folders, which are often quite large and bulky, are an important aspect of VBA's business. Ergonomic chairs and office furniture are provided and instructions on how to eliminate or reduce back injuries are consistently offered.

VHA. In addition to the above mentioned electronic tracking system, VHA VISN safety staff also conduct annual OSH oversight evaluations of their facilities, issue reports of OSH violations (based on the 29 CFR 1960), and recommend abatement actions. An automated survey program has been developed and is now in the testing phase. The automated system will correlate OSH inspection information into reports that contain OSHA regulatory references, provide analyses of facility risk, and furnish management with pertinent OSH information in a timely manner.

**4. Does your agency use injury and illness data to set program priorities and objective?**

NCA. Injury data is used to determine training approaches in subsequent monthly meetings, posted bulletins, or verbal advisories.

VBA. As yet, the injury data are not used to set priorities in VBA.

VHA. VHA uses injury and illness data to establish OSH program priorities and objectives. Injury and illness data has also been used to set performance measures for VHA managers; prioritize education and training objectives, health promotion and injury prevention goals; and to focus our occupational health research agenda. The data is provided by a department-wide, standardized computer workers' compensation program tracking system that can be accessed by authorized VA staff on their desktop computers. The tracking system improves employee injury and illness claim tracking and case management.

**5. Does your agency use injury and illness data to evaluate the performance of top managers?**

NCA. Yes. It is being written into the performance standards of all field directors.

VBA. As yet, the injury data is not included in the director's performance measures within VBA.

VHA. Yes. Beginning in 1998, specific goals and targets have been identified for senior managers' performance standards.

**B. Written Safety and Health Program**

**1. Does your agency have an up-to-date written safety and health program? Please attach a copy.** Yes. VA has an up-to-date written OSH program policy. VA Directive 7700, "Occupational Safety and Health," and the accompanying Handbook 7700.1, provide OSH direction to all VA administrations. See attached copy.

**a. When was it last updated?** VA Directive 7700 and Handbook 7700.1 were issued in July 1998.

b. ***Does the written safety and health program reflect current occupational safety and health policies and procedures?*** Yes. In addition, the VA OSH program allows administrations the flexibility to establish new OSH programs in accordance with OSHA regulations and other generally accepted guidelines and standards, as appropriate.

c. ***Does the written safety and health program reflect current organization structure?*** Yes. Although administrations have reorganized to implement the Government Results and Performance Act and other veteran care management improvements, the directive reflects the overall structure of VA organizations.

2. ***Does your Department's sub-agencies have separate written safety and health programs specific to their operations? If so, how does your Departmental program relate to the sub-agencies programs?***

NCA. Yes, each area office has a Safety Officer responsible for overall program direction. Safety issues are identified and addressed within each of these areas by supervising area office directors (i.e. snake bite measures in snake-prevalent areas; frostbite prevention in areas with extreme low ambient temperatures; sunscreen; and personal hydration issues in hot climates, etc.).

VBA. VBA's regional offices often work with and rely upon co-located medical centers. Typically, regional offices designated safety coordinators are trained and familiar with safety and health policies, and they respond appropriately when safety and health issues arise.

3. ***Have agency managers, supervisors, employees and employee representatives been provided with training to familiarize them with the written safety and health program?***

NCA. Yes.

VBA. No. VBA's written program is not yet developed.

C. Safety and Health Program Training

1. ***How does your agency ensure that managers, supervisors, employees and employee representatives have been trained in the requirements of the safety and health program?***

NCA. Through Annual Safety Inspections, monthly safety meetings, specialized training sessions, and individual familiarization with equipment requirements, operations, and responsibilities.

VBA. In VBA, supervisory training and new employee orientations provide managers, supervisors, and employees with information regarding VA safety and health policies.

VHA. Requirements of the OSH program are relayed through facility OSH staff; National OSH workshops; teleconferences; monthly conference calls; directives, information/alert bulletins; letters; and consultation by VHA VISN safety and health staff.

**2. *How does your agency train managers, supervisors, employees and employee representatives to recognize the hazards of their work operations?***

NCA. Annual training in a variety of subjects is completed at the different organizational levels. Additional training is provided through interagency cooperation with other Federal agencies. We also develop effective training relationships with servicing medical centers or supervisory area office training coordinators to schedule refresher or new training sessions.

VBA. The VBA safety coordinator occasionally attends national VA safety and health training. Supervisors and employees are trained locally.

VHA. VHA provides training at the facilities in hazard recognition through supervisors training new employees; commercially available professional training courses; training courses developed in conjunction with the Employee Education Service. Facility safety and health staff offers training in hazard recognition using the VHA OSH Guidebooks as a resource or training packages developed by the DASHO and their training committees.

**3. *What training has your agency done to help managers develop hazard abatement plans when abatement cannot be achieved within 30 workdays?***

NCA. Special emphasis is placed on informing their managers of all safety information and techniques through their bi-monthly safety bulletins. This has resulted in timely resolution of hazardous conditions in the workplace. If abatement cannot be accomplished within 30 workdays, managers are required to develop a written action plan in conjunction with the Area Safety Officer.

VBA. Abatement plans for hazards are not an issue for VBA because the regional offices typically reside in GSA buildings or are co-located in VHA medical centers.

VHA. VHA develops abatement plans within facility engineering departments in consultation with the facility OSH staff, VISN OSH staff, or OSH contractors. The engineering staffs have received OSH training through courses available through the VHA Employee Education Campus in North Little Rock, Arkansas.

## II. ACCOMPLISHMENTS

***Please describe the major success story or stories of occupational safety and health in your Agency during the reporting period.***

NCA. Over the past four years NCA has achieved a continued reduction in their agency's OWCP roster. This reduction, in addition to a decrease in lost time accidents, shows that their safety efforts are effective, and achieving benefits for the agency that result in cost savings. NCA is also experiencing a reduction of accidents through programs that foster employee involvement.

VBA. VBA has not provided specific examples of success stories.

VHA. The Under Secretary for Health has made occupational safety and health a key component of VHA's reorganization efforts by establishing annual OSH performance measures for supervisors and managers. These measures provide emphasis and focus management attention on the value and importance of organizational OSH programs.

To support these efforts, VHA developed a real-time automated management and tracking system for accidents and illnesses at each VA medical facility. This accident and injury-tracking module is currently in use and additional occupational health modules are in development. Future phases of this project will add the capacity to track safety and health issues such as medical surveillance, training, and other required record keeping information. In addition to providing the capability to track these issues locally, the database will allow the analysis of national trends.

In addition, VHA has developed an automated data entry system for VISN safety staff to use during facility OSH oversight inspections. This system is in pilot testing now and will be used by all VISNs beginning in Fiscal Year 1999. These initiatives have provided a focus for occupational safety and health efforts within VHA and have been a key factor in reducing VHA's lost time case rates.

The Under Secretary for Health also created the Occupational and Environmental Strategic Health Care Group to coordinate OSH activities across VHA. This group not only coordinates all VHA OSH activities, but also provides leadership and integration with clinical activities.